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Ozal's Words To the Wise

Ask a visionary a loaded question, and you may well wind up disarmed.

This happened the other day at a Washington think tank visited by Turgut Ozal, the far-seeing president of Turkey. Ozal was asked about the danger that the fundamentalist ayatollahs of Iran pose for the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and other parts of the Islamic world. Smiling to himself, Ozal responded with a story that puts the right perspective on American concern about Iran:

The story was told to Ozal by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's president. It involves a visit by Rafsanjani, then a dissident Shiite clergyman, to Turkey in the early 1970s—when the late Shah Mohammed Pahlavi was seeking to turn Iran into the industrial equivalent of West Germany and the unchallenged military power of the Persian Gulf.

"In the 1970s, Iran could get the most powerful American warplanes and the latest weapons for its army, while Turkey could only get F-4s and other old equipment," Ozal said. And while Turkey could not afford to import enough oil to keep its cities lit and heated, "Iran in 1974 received \$24 billion for its oil production" and spent it lavishly.

Rafsanjani first visited Turkey about that time, bringing with him a transistor radio that "at least 15 Turks tried to buy," he told Ozal on a recent official visit. The Iranian's point was to underline how backward Turkey had been.

But Ozal had the last laugh. At the end of Rafsanjani's recent visit, "I sent him home with a gift of the entire set of Turkish-manufactured compact disc players, video cassette recorders and television equipment," Ozal said with satisfaction. It was a way of asking, the Turkish leader said, "Now, which country do you think is stronger" and better off?

In 1992 Iran received only \$12 billion in oil revenue to support a devastated economy. Turkey meanwhile has become under Ozal's leadership an economic success story and a regional military power.

In a typically undiplomatic assessment, Ozal made clear that he is no admirer of the fundamentalist regime in Tehran. "The Iran regime will try to extend its control to other countries, yes. But its efforts are not very convincing."

Ozal is right on both of his main points:

America and its friends should be concerned about the ayatollahs' intentions and capabilities. They are not "moderates," and they intend West-

ern countries no good.

But America should not overreact or overestimate Iran. The Clinton administration should not repeat the mistakes of the Bush administration by skewing policies to counter an anticipated future Iranian threat. This was a major factor in George Bush's disastrous decision to give Iraq's Saddam Hussein the benefit of every doubt until the invasion of Kuwait.

Many of the same voices that urged Bush to go easy on Saddam as a way of defeating the Iranian threat—to manipulate a supposedly minor evil against a bigger evil—are again urging that the top priority in the region must be confronting Iran. The implication that President Clinton should ease the U.S. stand against Saddam as part of a redesigned Persian Gulf policy are delivered sotto voce this time, but they are clear.

Introducing Ozal to a Carnegie Endowment meeting in Washington last week, Morton Abramowitz, the former U.S. ambassador to Ankara, disclosed that in a meeting in January 1990, Ozal warned Bush that his most dangerous enemy was Saddam Hussein, not the Iranians, and urged Bush to confront rather than mollify the Iraqi dictator.

"That warning was lost in policy," Abramowitz noted with regret, as was Ozal's advice to Bush in the closing days of the gulf war that Saddam had to be toppled from power rather than left in place to do more harm. (See why Ozal is my kind of guy?)

Iran is not the fulcrum of the turbulent Muslim-inhabited region between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean; Turkey is, as Ozal's gentle jibe at Rafsanjani suggests.

Whether Turkey is strengthened or weakened by the enormous pressures and opportunities it confronts—from its actual or potential involvement in Bosnia, the Central Asian republics that broke away from the former Soviet Union, the conflicts of Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Cyprus—is one of most important questions on the global agenda over the next five years.

"Today, as Turks watch the reemergence of Turkish communities from Yugoslavia to Iraq, China and Siberia, their press notes that Turkish is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world," Rand regional expert Graham E. Fuller writes in "Turkey Faces East," a recent study. "It is now commonly repeated in Turkey that the 21st century will be the century of the Turks."

Ozal does not engage in such grandiose predictions. But he does recall telling Bush one other thing: "The global conflict between communism and capitalism will be replaced by global religious conflict. If we all handle these crises wrong, that conflict could be Islam versus Christianity. We have to avoid that."

Given Ozal's track record on his predictions to George Bush, it is a warning worth heeding.